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ABSTRACT

The Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) is designed to help school district leaders improve support to schools by participating in a five-step analysis of the work of the central office. It enables a district to examine the impact, effectiveness, and coherence of operations across departments, units, and levels, and to help central-office staff members act in concert with the larger system's overall strategies, goals, and outcomes. The review process relies on commitments from the CORRE team, made up of representatives from the district and School Communities That Work (SCtW) members and consultants. Tools developed by SCtW and the Annenberg Institute will also support the work. The five steps of the analysis involve: (1) preparation; (2) developing shared understanding of the district and identifying priorities; (3) deepening the understanding of the priority issue(s); (4) compiling and analyzing data on the priority issue(s); and (5) developing action steps. The major activities, primary goal, and supporting documents/tools are described for each step in this paper. After the action steps have been determined, SCtW will continue to work with the district. The work may involve varying levels and frequency of feedback and consultation on the implementation of the action steps. (RT)

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Central Office Review for Results and Equity

School Communities that Work:
A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

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School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University to examine a feature of the public education system that has often been overlooked: the urban school district. Its primary goals are to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.

To help imagine what high-achieving school communities would look like and how to create them, the Task Force convened influential leaders from the education, civic, business, and nonprofit communities to study three critical areas: building capacity for teaching and learning; developing family and community supports; and organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems.

The following Task Force members guided the development of this article; Ellen Foley and Marla Ucelli were the principal writers.

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For more information on the School Communities that Work Task Force, visit our Web site at www.schoolcommunities.org

School Communities that Work envisions urban education systems in which all schools meet high academic performance standards, with no significant differences in achievement based on race, ethnicity, or family income. Few city school districts currently meet these criteria. Many urban districts face major constraints – such as fiscal instability, difficult politics, and poor labor-management relations – that hamper their efforts to improve student achievement. In some cities, achieving this goal will mean a radical re-visioning of the district, such as breaking it up into smaller districts, moving the central office from service provision to contracting and brokering, or creating networks of autonomous schools.

But existing districts can also be redesigned to provide an infrastructure of services, policies, and expectations that support school-level improvements in teaching and learning and that ensure equivalent results across whole systems of schools. To do so will require, among other things, more effective alignment of central office practices, resources, and policies with the varying needs of individual schools in the context of a shared set of teaching and learning priorities.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We use the term *school district* or *district* to refer to the elements that make it up: schools, central office, school board, and community. We use the term *central office* to speak of the superintendent, cabinet, and school-district employees not working at the school-building level.

Our work is based on a concept of equity that acknowledges the need to differentiate supports and resources for different needs, while maintaining common high expectations and standards. Thus, some students, teachers, and schools will require and get more and different supports and resources than other students, teachers, and schools. But that does not mean that every school or individual will be subject to different *policies*. The Central Office Review for Results and Equity is designed to help districts develop overarching policies that allow for variation in implementation according to the varying needs of schools, their staff, and their students.

Purpose

We believe it is possible for school districts, particularly their central offices, to support schools more effectively, efficiently, and equitably. The Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) is designed to help school district leaders improve support to schools by participating in a five-step analysis of the work of the central office.

Often, central office departments, units, and even individual employees implement policy, interact with schools and school personnel, and provide services that are inconsistent with the system's objectives. Sometimes, central offices do not themselves deliver the supports they lead but, instead, act as brokers for services from outside vendors.

The CORRE enables a district to examine the impact, effectiveness, and coherence of operations across departments, units, and levels and to help central office staff act in concert with the larger system's overall strategies, goals, and outcomes. After the CORRE, the central office might still provide various services to different individuals and groups, but it would do so intentionally.

By participating in the Central Office Review, district leaders can improve supports to schools in a particular area and can learn a process for dealing with issues that might arise in the future. The CORRE helps school districts engage in a cycle of continuous improvement; ask important questions; and incorporate information, reflection, and feedback into their decisions, policies, and practices.

The CORRE process is carried out by a team of district leaders and consultants from outside the district who are experienced in content areas, systems and culture change, and leadership for learning. During the three-to-five-month period of the review, the team chooses a particular focus issue, examines quantitative and qualitative data about it, and develops plans for improvement. The process is supported by several tools, described in more detail below. These tools are intended to help guide the process, not to exhaustively define it: the CORRE is customized for each district. Once the process has been worked through, it can be repeated, either focusing on different issue areas or following through on the initial efforts.

Infrastructure

The review process relies on commitments from the CORRE team, made up of representatives from the district and SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK (SCtW) members and consultants. Tools developed by SCtW and the Annenberg Institute will also support the work. Some costs will be supported by SCtW, but participating districts must provide substantial in-kind and other contributions.

Commitments from School Communities that Work and the Annenberg Institute

SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK will broker connections between the participating district and SCtW members and consultants, providing support for their joint work. It will also appoint a member of the SCtW staff to serve as corre liaison. SCtW will provide the district with access to all the SCtW tools and resources developed through the work of its Task Force in the areas of building capacity for quality teaching and leadership; organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems; and developing family and community supports.

Commitments from the District

The district will appoint a CORRE liaison to help compile an overview of district data, as well as to facilitate meetings and site visits. The district will support the liaison's time working on the review process as well as the time for the district employees involved in the CORRE team. The district will also provide meeting space and any necessary access, entry, and transportation to schools for data gathering. The district, through the superintendent and the board, will encourage full participation in the CORRE by its staff, schools, and key external partners.

Composition of the CORRE Team

The CORRE team will be composed of two to four SCtW members and consultants and ten to twelve district representatives and partners.

District members[1] of the CORRE team should include:

- superintendent
- deputy superintendents in charge of human resources, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and assessment/accountability
- regional or grade-level superintendents
- teacher leader(s) or teachers' union representative(s)
- principal leader(s) or principals' union representative(s)

[1] Titles may vary.

We also strongly recommend that the team include:

- board of education representative(s)
- key community partner(s) (e.g., director of local education fund; chamber of commerce; grassroots education organizations)
- parent leadership
- other members of the superintendent's cabinet

While district representation may vary according to the size and organization of the district, we recommend that the number of team members from within the district and its community not exceed twelve. We also recommend that at least one community partner be included.

The individuals who make up the SCtW network bring expertise in district leadership, organizational development, adult learning, teacher and leader professional development, research, and meeting facilitation. They also have broad experience as practitioners in urban districts and as policy makers at the state and local levels. Depending on the anticipated focus of the Central Office Review (see step 2 below), SCtW members or consultants with specific areas of expertise can be engaged as needed as members of or advisors to the CORRE team. The CORRE process will also be supported by Annenberg Institute staff and consultants.

The Process

The district's superintendent sets the process in motion by appointing the district liaison who, in conjunction with the SCtW liaison, has primary responsibility for planning the logistics of the process. Once the CORRE team has been formed, the members work cooperatively through the five-step process, illustrated in the *Summary Figure and Timeline*[2] and described below.

[2]Tools and supporting documents (indicated in italics) will be available on-line at www.schoolcommunities.org by January 2003.

STEP 1. Preparation

Major activities

The two liaisons prepare background information about the district and share it with the team. Through consultation with the superintendent, the liaisons also begin to identify issue areas to be addressed in the CORRE.

Primary Goals

- to find mutually agreed-upon dates to conduct the review
- to prepare information about the district to share with the team
- to begin to identify issue areas to be addressed in the CORRE

Supporting Documents/Tools

The information about the district will be compiled using the *Data Framework for Joint Focus-Setting*, which emphasizes outcomes of teaching and learning, inputs (staff certification, attendance, etc.) and key strategies for improving teaching and learning that the district has put in place.

STEP 2. Developing Shared Understanding of the District and Identifying Priorities

Major activities

The team convenes for a two-to-three-day-long facilitated meeting to discuss the information that was prepared in step 1 about the district and its key strategies for improving teaching and learning across schools. This meeting will include two to three school visits to help ground the CORRE team in a shared experience of the district; a structured review of the data collected in step 1; selection and discussion of an issue area or areas the district needs to address; and identification of key informants and schools to visit in the chosen issue area(s).

Primary Goals

- to share an understanding of the district's status in terms of achievement and strategies for

changes leading to improved school practice and student outcomes

- to agree on a priority issue or issues that need to be addressed in the district
- to discuss background information about the issue(s), including sources of problems and recent initiatives, focusing on the coordination and alignment of supports from the central office
- to develop recommendations for the selection of informants, sites for visits, and type of observations needed to illustrate the issue(s) and/or central office, school, and classroom strategies related to the issue area(s)

The key informants will include staff from the central office and from key partner organizations (e.g., unions, community agencies, reform support organizations). The school sample will be purposeful, selected to illustrate the district's efforts on the issue area(s) selected. The sample of schools should strive to be as representative as possible of the student population of the school district, the school levels involved in the issue to be addressed, and the range of achievement in the district. The total number of schools to be visited should not exceed ten.

In addition to the overview of district data compiled in step 1, SCtW has developed a list of priority issues built around its essential functions for local education support systems (see sidebar). To help the CORRE team address these priority issues in a set of schools, SCtW has developed a *School Visit Planning Sheet*.

ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS & PRIORITY ISSUES

I. **Provide schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions**
   - A. Professional development
   - B. Accelerated academic, linguistic and cultural supports
   - C. Youth development advocacy and practices

II. **Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions**
   - A. Human resources
   - B. Teaching and learning tools and resources

III. **Make decisions and hold educators throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and activities**
   - A. School authority and budgetary flexibility
   - B. System accountability

STEP 3. Deepening the Understanding of the Priority Issue(s)

Major activities

Using the knowledge of the district and the analysis of the issue(s) achieved in step 2, the CORRE team visits schools and makes classroom observations, conducts focus groups and interviews with central office and school staff and students, and consults with community members in order to gather more data that deepens the understanding of the issue to be addressed.

To help facilitate visits to schools, the liaisons should work not only to schedule the logistics for the visits, but also to collect and distribute background material on each school, such as school improvement plans, organizational charts, state and/or district "report cards" or performance reports, and any special recognitions or descriptions of special programs in the school.

Primary goals

- to gather data for an in-depth analysis of the multiple perspectives on the issue area(s)
- to add the voice of mid-level managers, principals, teachers, community members, and students to the analysis of the issue

Supporting Documents/Tools

The *Sample Introductory Letter* to schools outlines the purpose and structure of the school visits. Additionally, the interviews, focus groups, and site visits will be structured around the *School Observation Checklist*, the *School Summary Survey*, and the *Focus Group/Interview Summary*. The *Interview and Focus Group Guidelines by Issue Area* will help guide the data collection. These guidelines will be customized to reflect the issue area(s) agreed on in step 2 and to reflect the specific needs of the school district, also identified in step 2.

STEP 4. Compiling and Analyzing Data on the Priority Issue(s)

Major activities

Data from the school-visit checklists, interviews, site visits, observations, and focus groups conducted in step 3 will be compiled by SCtW, with assistance from the CORRE liaison and the district's research staff, if possible. This compilation of data will be shared among all CORRE team members during the first half of a two-to-three-day meeting. This compilation will involve only preliminary analysis and will focus on organizing the data into categories suitable for further examination.

During this step, the CORRE team will analyze the compiled, categorized data and draw conclusions about implications for central office practice and policy. By analyzing the data in this way, CORRE team members will be participating in "action research," reflecting on data about their own work in order to improve it. The analysis will emphasize alignment, effectiveness, and equity.

Primary goals

- to reach consensus on the key problems and their causes
- to share an understanding of how central office policies and strategies are enacted at the school level
- to learn about district constituents' perceptions of the district's strategies and compare them to the perceptions of leadership
- to generate hypotheses about actions the central office, intermediaries, schools, and partners can take to improve supports for teaching and learning

Supporting Documents/Tools

This step is supported by the *Guidelines for Analysis* and the *School Summary Survey Compilation Sheet*.

STEP 5. Developing Action Steps

Major activities

In the second half of the two-to-three-day meeting, the CORRE team works to make recommendations on action steps that are suggested by the investigation into the issue areas and central office strategies related to it.

Primary Goal

- to come to agreement about concrete steps that can be taken to improve the central office's support for schools and about who should take them

Supporting Documents/Tools

This step is supported by the full *Portfolio for District Redesign*.

After the CORRE

After the action steps have been determined, SCtW will continue to work with the district. This may involve varying levels and frequency of feedback and consultation on the implementation of the action steps.

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